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# What Syria And Israel Share

As Palestinian guerrillas leave Lebanon, attention turns to the other occupying forces in the country. Syria and Israel, apart from armies in Lebanon, have local allies and vital strategic interests at stake.

Though mutually hostile, Damascus and Jerusalem derive from their occupation shared concerns. The foremost task of diplomacy in the Middle East now is to evoke the hidden harmonies that interlock the regimes of Hafez Assad and Menachem Begin.

President Assad sits atop perhaps the most precarious governmental structure in the world. He and the small group of military men who control the Syrian armed forces are members of a tiny Moslem sect—the Alawites. They depend heavily on repression to rule over a population in which a major Moslem sect, the Sunnis, predominates.

Schemes for Arab unity appeal to the Alawites as a device for eclipsing local differences. So Assad has been a zealous exponent of Arab causes, especially the liberation of Palestine.

But backing the Palestinians intensifies troubles with Israel. Iraq and Jordan, the neighboring Arab states, have been at times jealous—and at other times suspicious—of Syria's pan-Arab ambitions. So Assad has had to develop various counterweights—Russia for arms against the Israelis; and Iran and Saudi Arabia against Iraq.

Moreover, he has felt obliged to keep a close watch on the Palestine Liberation Organization lest its guerrilla actions engage him in a losing war with Israel. It was in part to avert that danger that Assad sent Syrian troops to Lebanon beginning in 1975. During the recent fighting, the Syrians, while defending their own installations in Lebanon, did not lift a finger to help the PLO against Israeli attacks.

Pulling troops out of Lebanon at this time would not be easy for Assad. Withdrawal would, in effect, acknowledge failure of the expedition, and might breed the mutinous feelings that flourish in armies obliged to retreat. It might also expose local political allies developed by Syria in northern Lebanon.

But Syria's lines are now dangerously overextended. Israeli forces are within 25 miles of Damascus. "Assad's palace guard," as one American put it, "is strung out in Lebanon just when he needs it most for the palace." So Assad might consent to a major reduction in Syrian forces provided that there was a pullout by the Israelis.

The regime of Prime Minister Begin staked the whole future of Israel on the invasion of Lebanon. So far the going has been good. Israeli forces have been able to occupy all of southern Lebanon, rout the PLO and destroy the Soviet missile systems brought in by the Syrians. An Israeli-backed Lebanese Christian, Bashir Gemayel, was elected president of Lebanon last week.

But Israel's financial resources have been strained, and also its precious reserves of manpower. The invasion cost the Israelis much of their moral support in this country, and whatever bit of backing they had in most of the rest of the world. And at least some elements of opinion inside Israel have been made restive by the government's military actions.

From the beginning, Begin insisted that Israel "harbored no territorial designs on Lebanon." But the Israelis have conditions for troop withdrawal. They want to be certain about the survival of President-elect Gemayel, and about the continuing influence of their allies in southern Lebanon. And of course, they will want the Syrian troops to withdraw also.

Arranging a deal between Syria and Israel comes hard. Mortal enmity has marked relations between the two countries in the past. Hard-liners in each capital beat the drums for holding tight to advantages gained by past military actions. But certainly there is no case for the hand-wringing pessimism purveyed by those who insist force cannot have good results.

The leaders of Syria and Israel are sophisticated men of considerable maturity. They have been signaling each other for months. Thus the Syrians did not hit out at Israeli territory during the recent fighting. The Israelis spared Syria from direct attack.

Now both countries have an interest in a slow, staged mutual withdrawal from Lebanon. The signaling has been intensified. Rifat Assad, brother of the president and commander of the palace guard, has been in Washington, and though the visit is "private," he has been seeing officials at the Central Intelligence Agency. Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon came here Friday. In an interview, Sharon said, "We certainly don't want to have to attack the Syrians. I hope the Americans will tell that to Rifat Assad. That comes from the horse's mouth."